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SUBJECT: THE LATEST TARGET IN MEXICO'S DRUG WARS: THE SINALOA PRESS

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¶1. Summary: Increasing narco-violence has caused some Mexican states to become virtual open war zones. The cartels, fighting among themselves for control of territory and pressed by President Felipe Calderon's counternarcotics campaign, have resorted to blatant acts of violence - both in an effort to gain control and as a means to fan popular discontent against the government. Against this backdrop, media outlets have often been caught in the middle. Either via direct coercion, or indirectly through veiled challenges against their investigations, the media have come under greater pressure to censure their reporting. In one of the epicenters of drug violence, Sinaloa state, a few courageous elements of the press continue to support federal counternarcotics efforts despite considerable risks to their lives and livelihoods. Post has made assistance to these besieged journalists a key public diplomacy priority. End Summary.

THE REALITY IN SINALOA

¶2. The drug war is playing out in different ways throughout the country, but one of the more clear examples of how this pressure can spill out against the media is most evident in the northwestern state of Sinaloa. The capital city of Culiacan has become one of the leading cities in the latest wave of violence. Shoot-outs in broad daylight are common and there is a sense that local authorities are either unable or unwilling (they themselves being corrupted by cartels) to punish the guilty. Nationally, cartel killings have numbered well over 5,000 through 2008, and in the state of Sinaloa alone there have been over 1,000 deaths attributed to drug battles.

A MESSAGE TO THE MEDIA

¶3. Tied to this alarming trend has been a string of attacks against media outlets in the city. On November 16, 2008, two individuals with presumed connections to drug traffickers threw fragment grenades at the leading daily newspaper El Debate. The attack shattered windows, blew a hole in the floor and damaged the metal gate at one of their main entrances. Since the attack occurred at midnight, it was not done to kill people, but rather to send a message. Just a few days before the grenade attacks, a simulated severed human head had been left in a bag in their staircase in another chilling effort to stop their reporting.

DEFYING THE DRUG LORDS

¶4. El Debate and other media outlets have been leading voices against the cartels and drug-related violence. Their editorials

calling for prosecution of criminals and their reporting on organized crime and its connections to politically powerful elements have made them a tempting target. As a result of wanting to expose the hypocrisy and corruption of the drug war (numerous high-level officials have recently fallen at the federal level), the press in Sinaloa have found themselves staring down the barrels of the guns of the drug lords who don't want public exposure of their role in local corruption. Nevertheless, the paper relentlessly continues to write about the problem, recently publishing a principal editorial stating: "Impunity is one of the major ills of the country in fighting crime, and too thin the dividing line between police and criminals, it becomes impossible to reduce crime," and has continued to call for further reforms.

15. PDOff recently met with the directors of El Debate and other leading newspapers to discuss the current situation in the aftermath of these attacks. The owner of El Debate showed the area where the attack occurred. While repairs to the windows and walls were now completed a month after the attack, damage could still be seen in the protective metal gate. The paper's owner and managing editor reiterated their belief that this was an attack by drug cartels, and had no faith in the local authorities to capture or prosecute those responsible. (Note: to date no one has been arrested or questioned regarding these attacks). Working level reporters individually discussed their own fears in covering drug-related crimes, and how even their long-established contacts in the police department were not reliable due to corruption. As a result, the local journalist organizations were working with their members to ensure that they could verify information via phone before traveling to a location, triple checking sources, carrying extra cell phones and traveling in pairs for added protection.

A RISKY PROPOSITION

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16. In spite of these threats, all media outlets vowed to continue what they viewed as the public's right to know about the drug war. In fact, during the visit by PDOff, a gun battle in an upscale part of the city left five people dead in another round of narco vendettas. But the press have continued to cover these and other matters in the face of this increasing danger.

17. Various reporters discussed security options and a fear about their own well-being. Media outlets have limited contingency plans to protect their reporters and the reporters themselves have taken to ad hoc means of attempting to cover stories while remaining safe. This is not an easy task, as the NGO Reporters without Borders in their 2008 annual report on Mexico called the country "the most deadly in the Americas for journalists."

COMMENT: SHORING UP THE MEDIA IS A VITAL TASK

18. The media and its ability to influence public opinion will play a key role in the eventual success or failure of President Calderon's counternarcotics efforts. Exposure in the press is often the only weapon available against corrupt or incompetent public officials whose actions facilitate the work of the drug cartels. Recognizing this, PAS Guadalajara is working closely with the media in west-central Mexico to fortify its capacity to withstand narco pressures. Post recently organized a conference in Guadalajara with the Knight Foundation to help journalists learn new tips for covering high-risk stories while remaining safe, and plans to offer a similar conference in Sinaloa next year. We will also continue to assist the press through reporting tours, and opportunities to hear from high-level policy makers. This vigorous public diplomacy campaign is essential for maintaining popular support for the Merida

Initiative and preventing local media from sinking further into a state of fear and self-censorship, which is exactly what the cartels want.

RAMOTOWSKI